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ABSTRACT

Defining the concept "rural" to the satisfaction of demographers, policymakers, educational researchers, sociologists, journalists, and legislators is an ongoing and complex problem. As a sampling of definitions used by different researchers/agencies illustrates, the two categories of definitions of rural--qualitative and quantitative--generally spring from different needs. Agencies and researchers need quantitative measures that can be easily manipulated, sorted, and compared. Others who are closely involved know that their part of rural America is qualitatively different from other rural areas. These two divergent needs, to quantify and to qualify, present a dilemma in terms of access to resources and programs for rural America and for rural education. It is difficult to capture qualitative measures in ways that readily translate to legislation, policy, or management. Further, rural America's insistence that it is not only different, but has differences within itself, is both its strength and its weakness. The inability to present a unified, powerful rural America to legislators and other policymakers ensures that rural issues, such as education, will continue to suffer from a lack of recognition and resources. Twenty-three references are appended. (JMM)

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ERIC DIGEST

RURAL EDUCATION

EDO-RC-88-09

"RURAL"—A Concept Beyond Definition?

The problem of defining "rural" is not new. People know when they are rural, but such perception does not satisfy demographers, policymakers, or educational researchers. After all, difficult policy decisions have to be made and resources have to be allocated on some quantifiable basis. Numbers, however, miss the essence of what it means to be rural, and seldom satisfy those on the receiving end of the definition. They know that rural Maine is not like rural Texas, which in turn is not the same as rural Georgia or rural Alaska.

What follows makes no attempt to provide the definition of rural and/or rural education that is so eagerly sought by journalists, legislators, and others in their efforts to quickly and neatly pigeonhole rural America and its attributes. Instead, the intent is to show the complexity of the problem of defining rural, to provide examples of definitions that are in use by different agencies, and to sample operational definitions derived by educators in the absence of a workable, centralized definition.

What is rural?

In order to define rural education or rural schools, it is necessary to define "rural." Developing such a definition has been a conceptual problem for educators, legislators, demographers, sociologists, and others for some time. For example, in an analysis of 178 rural mental health and rural sociology sources published from 1971 through 1980, 43% of the sources did not define the "rural" they discussed, 48% used local or "homemade quantitative" definitions, and 23% used "external quantitative" definitions such as census data (Bosak & Perlman, 1982). This presumedly shared understanding of what rural is--and a preference for other than official definitions of rural--permeates the literature.

What are some quantitative definitions of rural?

According to Whitaker (1982), "rural" was first used by the U.S. Bureau of the Census in 1874 when it was defined as the population of a county exclusive of any cities or towns having 8,000 or more inhabitants. Modified over the years, by the 1980 Census a specific definition for rural had been dropped. Instead, the urban population is now defined as all persons living in urbanized areas and in places of 2,500 or more located outside urbanized areas; all population not classified as urban constitutes the rural population (U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1983).

One way to define rural is by ignoring the term and by determining what it is not. The Office of Management and the Budget defines metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs) as geographic areas consisting of a large population nucleus, together with economically and socially related adjacent communities. The remaining areas are categorized as nonmetropolitan (Morrissey, 1987).

To further complicate matters, the Farmers Home Administration considers rural areas to be open country, communities of up to 20,000 population in nonmetropolitan areas, and towns of up to 10,000 population with a rural character in metropolitan areas (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1980). The Rural Highway Public Transportation Administration defines rural as areas with populations of 5,000 or less. The Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Social and Rehabilitative Services, and several agencies under the U.S. Department of

RC 016 599

Agriculture define rural as areas outside MSAs (Pressler & Swenson, 1984).

What are some qualitative definitions of rural?

According to Blakely (1984), the major features previously used to define rural--simple life, agricultural, small, homogeneous, and dull--fail to describe much of today's rural America. Instead, rural is increasingly defined by examining numerous broad categories of information. Deavers & Brown (1985), for example, have developed seven categories of rural areas based on social, demographic, and economic information. Their economic categories include agriculture, manufacturing, mining, and government; social dimensions include persistent poverty and growth of retirement population; the proportion of land in federal ownership comprises the final category. Horn (1985) looks at values, socioeconomic factors, political structure/locus of control, and priorities for schools. Croft (1984) suggests that an ecological approach comprised of cultural values, number of people, and ambiance can be used in any geographic region to work toward a definition of rural. Noting that several other authors propose occupational, ecological, and sociocultural definitions of rural, Whitaker (1982) also supports complex, multidimensional definitions of rural. He cites a 10 category urban/rural typology developed by Maine's State Planning Office based on 15 indicators, such as number of year-round residents, persons per household, degree to which jobs are concentrated in a few industries, percent of resident workers employed in farming or fishing, monthly fluctuations in employment in the community, percent of housing built prior to 1940, etc.

What, then, is rural education?

Since there is no single definition of "rural," it follows that there is no clear definition for "rural education." Carmichael (1980, p. 21) confidently defines rural education as "that education provided the school-age children residing in rural areas," but then notes that there is some confusion over the term "rural." Dunne (1981) affirms that there <u>is</u> such a thing as rural education, but cautions that it is not found in large rural schools and is not even found in all small schools. "Real" rural education, she contends, is defined by these characteristically rural strengths (1981, p. 4):

-A lack of distinction between what "belongs" in school and what "belongs" in the community.
-A kind of generalism which expects people to do whatever they are able without specialized roles or strictly age-graded functions.
-Close and supportive ties between families and the school.
-A sense of comfort and cooperative spirit among the school children.
-Rural independence and self-reliance translated into the school setting.

What are some definitions of rural school districts and rural schools?

Helge (1983) offers a 3-dimensional approach to categorizing/defining rural school systems which includes elements of topography, population density, and other community and district variables. These variables include such items as district administrative structure, ethnic groups represented in the community, major religions practiced, average age of residents, community communication and power structures, degree to which district collaborates with other agencies, etc.

Citing the inadequacy of Census Bureau definitions for rural, Pladson and Lemon (1982) developed a two-factor model of ruralness for K-12 or 1-12 schools that encompasses both population and geographical isolation through use of two sets of criteria: school enrollment and distance from an urban center. Each criterion is divided into three categories which ultimately yield a model of most to least rural schools. The enrollment categories cover districts with enrollments of 0-100, 101-300, and 301-600. The isolation category is represented by schools located more than 40 miles from an urban center, 25-40 miles from an urban center, and 10 to 25 miles from an urban center.

The National Rural and Small Schools Consortium (1986) considers a district rural when the number of inhabitants is fewer than 150 per square mile, or when it is located in a county where 60% or more of the population lives in communities of 5,000 or fewer.

The New York State Education Department (1984) notes that a "rural" school district is generally defined as one that has 25 or fewer students per square mile.

Reporting in 1982, the Small/Rural Education Network Review Panel said that a rural school district is located in a rural community, or in a county where 60% or more of its communities are rural.

Sheldon Jackson College limits participation in its Early College Incentive Program to 8th graders from "rural Alaska"--towns or villages with populations under 2,000 (Craddick, 1986).

In Arkansas, the Legislature stipulates that "rural school" shall be interchangeable with the term "small high school" and shall include those schools with enrollments of 500 or less in K-12 (General Assembly of the State of Arkansas, 1981).

To survey rural administrators' research concerns, Hubel (1986) sent questionnaires to superintendents from schools with less than 1,000 students, K-12.

In their study of very small rural public schools in the United States, Dunne and Carlsen (1981) limited the survey pool to elementary schools with fewer than 15 pupils per grade, high schools with fewer than 200 pupils, and K-12 or 1-12 schools or districts with fewer than 300 pupils in all grades.

In the 1986 edition of The Condition of Education, issued by the U. S. Department of Education's Center for Education Statistics (1987), five terms are used to define or imply rurality: rural, nonmetropolitan, small town, small places, and school size. Rural and nonmetropolitan are used several times as subsets of "metropolitan status," along with suburban and urban. The Center did not initiate procedures to report data on districts with fewer than 300 students until March, 1983 (Helge, 1983).

These examples of efforts to define rural districts and rural schools are not empty exercises. According to Arends (1987), rural and small schools enroll nearly 10 million students, a significant figure by any standard.

Summary

As this sampling of definitions illustrates, the two categories of definitions of rural--qualitative and quantitative--generally spring from two different needs. Agencies and researchers need quantitative measures that can be easily manipulated, sorted, and compared. Like the blind men and the elephant, however, others who are closely involved in rural America know that their part is qualitatively different from other parts.

These two divergent needs--to quantify and to qualify--present a dilemma in terms of access to resources and programs for rural America and for rural education. It is difficult to capture qualitative measures in ways that readily translate to legislation, policy, or management. Further, rural America's insistence that it is not only different, but has myriad differences within itself, is both its strength and its weakness. The inability to present a unified, powerful rural America to legislators and other policymakers ensures that rural issues, such as education, will continue to suffer from a lack of recognition and resources.

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ERIC DIGEST

RURAL EDUCATION

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By

Betty Rose D. Rios

March 1988

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